A FAMILY ALBUM

Written by Phyllis Koehnline
Illustrated by Carolyn Koehnline

TO MY MOTHER ON HER EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

These stories tell of your beginnings.
I have visited them often now
Through your words,
The sound of your voice
The various black and white photos.

Now that I've let them travel through my body
To come out in pen and paint –
Producing the Carrie-ish versions of those people and places
My love for each of them has grown.

My appreciation for the rest of your story has grown too –
The skills you built upon,
The limitations and prejudices you chose to leave behind,
The unexpected turns you allowed your life to take.

We cannot know what those who departed long ago
Would think of all your choices
Nor how they themselves might have grown and changed in the decades you and I have lived through.
It has been my part to witness the second half of your life,
Not theirs.

So let me make it clear.

It is a good story,
A beautiful life,
Nourishing food for me, your youngest daughter
And for all the people who know and love you.

– Carolyn Eldridge Koehnline, December 2004

A FAMILY ALBUM

3010 Montrose Avenue

Summer Rest

The Old Neighborhood

Granny Gentry

Ma and Pa

My Daddy

Minnie and the Dillard Girls

Mother

Clarice

Tee Tee

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Illustrations created by Carolyn Koehnline in 2004

3010 MONTROSE AVENUE

My mother and father and I lived with my aunt Tee Tee in her two-story grayed stucco house that had three bedrooms, a bath, and Daddy's sign painting studio upstairs, and downstairs a living room, dining room, and kitchen, with a big front porch hidden behind a solid stucco wall. There were a couple of wicker rocking chairs and a squeaky glider out there, along with, one year, a colony of bees that made honey in the stucco pillars by the broad front steps.

I loved that porch. It was a great place to play on rainy afternoons. An umbrella or two opened up in front of the glider made a protected spot where I could be on a ship at sea or in a plane doing loops. On school days when it wasn't raining, I'd sit on those front steps and get my homework done as soon as I came in, so I could take off on my bike for the rest of the afternoon. I'd ride miles away to nearby parks all by myself, and it was OK because kids were pretty safe in those days.

I did have to practice the piano every day, but usually did that after supper. Mother said she really liked working alone in the kitchen, and would send me off to practice, saying, I'd rather have your room than your company. She was joking, but she was serious about me not helping. She'd had to work so hard for her family as she grew up, she wanted to spare me. So I grew up not knowing much about how to operate in a kitchen, and had to figure it all out after I was married.

Preparing to practice was a ritual. First I'd go upstairs, and then slide down the short banister, step over onto the top of the radiator, and from there to the top of the overstuffed chair by the lamp, on to the arm, and eventually down to the piano bench. It was an old player piano that had belonged to my grandmother. It didn't have any music rolls by then, but all the works moved, and I had great fun manipulating everything. You could even lock the keyboard so the keys didn't play. Eventually I got around to practicing, and actually liked it. One summer a girl across the street and I were both working on Return of Spring for recitals, and the neighborhood must have gotten pretty sick of that.

My room upstairs was my kingdom. My bed was right by the front windows, and I could put my pillow in the windowsill on warm nights and get a breeze. My dresser had a big mirror on top. I spent a long time in front of it, trying out hair styles when my hair got longer than just the straight bangs and cut to the tip of the ear I wore as a little girl. I also watched with some admiration as I practiced being Sonja Henie and copied her moves as best I could, with my

white socks pulled up to look like boots. Richmond was too warm for frozen over ponds, and there were no ice rinks in those days, so that's the closest I ever came to ice skating. But my school friend Martha and I used to draw and cut out little figures of ice skaters and freeze them to the birdbath out in the back yard to make our own rink.

In my room I had everything I needed - a radio so I could hear and memorize all the songs that made it to The Hit Parade, and books and writing and drawing materials at hand, so I could do whatever I felt like without anybody interrupting me. Occasionally I wished I had a sister, but not often, because it was a real advantage to have all that solitude and freedom. Most of my classmates were only children. In those Depression years, people didn't seem to want big families.

Tee Tee had the biggest room. It was her house, after all! She had a big double bed and a wardrobe, dresser and rocking chair all in light maple. I loved climbing up on her high bed and amusing myself while she ironed the fancy handkerchiefs and linens she embroidered. The iron would sizzle as she ran it over soaking wet cloth, carefully pressing down on the underside so that the little French knots and stitched leaves wouldn't get smashed.

Mother and Daddy had a smaller room, which should have been mine, I guess, since my room was pretty big for one person. But theirs was on the back of the house at the top of an outside stairway, and I think they felt uneasy leaving me there where somebody might break in and get me. Although, according to my mother's logic, that wouldn't happen. When I was frightened because of the Lindberg kidnapping, she assured me that people didn't snatch children whose families were not rich. I didn't have anything to worry about. But they took that back room, just the same.

Daddy's studio was sunny and bright, with windows all around, a good place for a sign painter to work on his patterns and designs.

The only bathroom was upstairs. Those little hexagon shaped white and black tiles made the floor, with the claw-footed tub and all the fixtures in white porcelain. There was no storage space that I can remember except the medicine chest. That's where the iodine was.

Down stairs we could eat in the kitchen, which we usually did except for Sunday dinner right after church. My Mother went to church every Sunday, but we always sat down to a roast, mashed potatoes and some vegetables and even rolls

every week. For dessert we had ice cream and chocolate sauce and one of Tee Tee's cakes.

The living room had subdued brownish wallpaper and a few pictures on the wall I remember well. Just inside the front door was a Maxwell Parrish woman sitting on a rock beside still water. I think it was called, A September Morn. Of course it was mostly blue, as was the great big picture over our fireplace. That had women in Greek looking flowing robes strolling through a classical looking building with white columns. Also on the wall were two more pictures, Pinky and Blue Boy, and an embroidered rendition of Anne Hathaway's cottage.

On Christmas Eve my folks didn't even put up the tree until I had gone to bed, and then had to arrange all the presents, not to mention put together a bike or a swing set. I remember lying with my pillow at the window on those nights watching for - what? The star? Or Santa Claus? Whichever showed up, I guess.

Early in the morning I had to wait to come down until Daddy lit the gas logs in the fireplace and turned on the little dim lights in the sconces on either side of the mantelpiece. We opened our stockings and the presents, had our traditional oyster stew for breakfast (which I learned to like a little more each year), and then I dressed and rushed next door to start visiting.

We used those logs a lot during the winter months, especially when we were in the living room listening to the big Philco radio. We knew that all up and down the street our neighbors, like us, were tuned to Lowell Thomas at 7:00, and at 7:15 to Amos 'n Andy. And when Your Hit Parade was on, we never missed it, and always tried to guess what song would be #1.

The house was pretty comfortable during Richmond's mild winters. I remember only two big snows while I was growing up, one of them right at Christmas time when I got my first big two-wheel bike. It was Mother who kept us warm. Daddy had a weak heart, so she was the one who tended that furnace in the basement, shoveling in coal during the day and then banking the fire just right at nighttime. She said, "I sure do hope when I die I go to heaven. I don't want to go on shoveling coal through all eternity!"

But there was no way to make that house equally comfortable in summer. We had fans, some moving hot air around in rooms, some in windows to draw out the heat. But in summer, our house was one hot place. We stayed out of it as long as we could, hoping it would cool off. Occasionally we'd go to a big movie

theater or to a bowling alley. They were the only places I know of that were air conditioned in those days except department stores. But they closed at 5:00.

Mostly we sat in the back yard, burning citronella candles, sipping on root beer or ginger ale floats and swinging in the big wooden double swing trying to stir up a breeze. Some nights we stayed out there far past my bedtime until we thought we could stand to go into the house and try to sleep. During the night I might find one of the adults stretched across the foot of my bed, right at the windowsill, because that might be the only spot in the whole place where any air was stirring. Somebody usually ended up on the upstairs back porch, trying to get comfortable on a folded up quilt on top of that hard tin flooring.

I've never been back into that house since we all moved away from it long ago. And I really don't want to. But I don't have to. I can still walk through it in my head any time I want to.

SUMMER REST

I can see myself now in one of the old rope swings with the wooden seat, all warped and grayed from weathering. It hung from a branch of a huge oak tree midway down a rolling lawn. Pumping up so high I could see over the fences and into the meadows beyond, I flew until I felt as tall as the mountains, all blue and misty in the distance, and I never wanted to stop. I never wanted to come home. I was at Summer Rest. That's a place where I spent some of the happiest days of my childhood.

It was a resort in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in Greenwood, near Charlottesville, built in the last of the 1800s by the Episcopal Church. They wanted to provide a safe and reasonable vacation spot for single working "girls." My mother and aunts and their friends went there in the early 1900s. One week's room and board was only $2.50, and that's what a round-trip train ticket from Richmond to Greenwood cost. There was a fifteen-charge to haul a trunk from the train station to Summer Rest.

For years no children or men were allowed at Summer Rest. But in the late 1920s my father drove the manager up to start the season, and our family all went along. Because of that, for most of my early years Daddy and I were the only man and child in the whole place. Did we get a lot of attention! We loved it!

We drove up in our big dark-blue Chevy. My mother and one lady rode up front, and my aunt rode in the back with the manager, and one or two other ladies, all rather ample in size. I guess I was about four years old when I first started going, and I sat in back on the ladies' soft laps, and took naps stretched out across them. I'll bet they loved that!

I liked being spoiled by them. "Miss Ethel" with the sweet smile was funny, and she brought me toys to play with. Chubby "Miss Lula" had a cute little black and white dog hand puppet she entertained me with, and one year she gave me a brown monkey hand puppet so we could play together. Mid-way through the trip we'd always stop at "The Crossroads," a store where two routes crossed, and where we always got "some-thing on a stick," meaning a Popsicle.

Then we were ready for the hairpin curve. That was on a steep hill, which our overloaded car just couldn't handle. So we'd all get out while my father backed up and got a running start up that hill. Then, rain or shine, we had to trudge up the hill on foot and pile back into the car for the rest of the trip. There was

always at least one flat tire my Daddy had to patch, and on rainy days we could expect to have to get out again and push whenever we got stuck in the red clay.

After our all-morning trip, when we finally rocked and bumped our way over the winding dirt road into the grounds, we let out a big cheer at our first sight of Summer Rest. Once we saw that sprawling pale yellow frame building with its red roofs and dark green shutters and those big porches, spread out across the top of a sloping yard all full of trees, we knew we were home!

Once inside, we found old friends and soon made new ones, and I was well cared for by everybody. As long as I was at the scrumptious meals on time, and in bed when my mother said I had to be (including an afternoon nap for everyone), I could do pretty much as I pleased. This was an isolated place, and there wasn't much way I could stray off or get into trouble.

There were always outdoor games to play - some I had to grow into like horse-shoes and darts. But very early on, I played croquet along with the rest of them on the steep front lawn. The slightest tap with the mallet, and the ball would go tumbling clear to the bottom of the hill. We had to make up our own rules about how far in you could bring a lost ball before you played again.

My favorite outdoor spot was in one of those swings. There were three or four hanging from the huge trees. I loved swinging, all by myself and daydreaming, with all those blue mountains and green hills, and meadows nearby with their sweet-smelling wild flowers, and new-mown grass. From some-where out of sight I could usually hear the faint tinkle of cowbells. -Too many times all that was interrupted by another fall from the swing on the rocks and red clay beneath. I've got lots of snapshot of those days at Summer Rest showing my band-aged knees.

When some adults took rides to scenic beauty spots, I went along - to Monticello and other grand estates. We hiked to nearby Greenwood, and often all the way to the Country Store in Crozet, where you could buy everything from Virginia hams to sun hats to ice cream to stamps, and where we had some of the earliest Dr. Pepper I can remember. Longer walks took us even onto the railroad tracks on cool days - but never into the tunnel! If we'd walked too far from home, we might be lucky enough to get a ride back in a passing truck.

All that exercise in the mountain air and a good noon meal made us ready for nap time from 1:00 to 3:00, after which we dressed for the "evening" (Southern for late afternoon) and for supper. That meant washing up and putting on a cool

summer dress - not as simple as it sounds. We had to go through the same routine we followed each morning.

The old school bell wakened us at 3:00, just as it had done as 7:30 that morning. So once again down the hall to the ladies' bathroom we'd go, wearing our pongee kimonos. We carried our big china pitchers and filled them with warm water, so we could wash up in the fluted washbowl on the wooden stand in our bedrooms. The pitcher, bowl, and even the chamber pot under the bed were fancy, with floral patterns. I suppose at one time they all matched. But what we used when I was there were very old even then, some chipped on the edges or crazed with the tiny lines of time and use.

After nap time people drifted out onto the big, wrap-around front porch, to play cards or other table games, or to sit in the large rocking chairs, doing needle-work, reading, or visiting with other guests. I usually headed for the library to work on jigsaw puzzles.

There was always a puzzle laid out on a round table in the small room which was lined with, even then, ancient best sellers. It had a fireplace that sometimes as late as July had a fire, because the mountain air could get really chilly.

When I think of that room, I see Bessie Wells, retired schoolteacher who kept the reservation records. She was straight and tall, her carefully finger-waved salt-and-pepper hair caught at the neck in a bun, and she sat at her roll-top desk in the corner, peering at her reservations books through steel-rimmed glasses. She kept everything running efficiently.

But when she wasn't working, Miss Bessie was mistress of the jigsaw puzzles. I joined her and "Kibbie," a delightful old lady I just adored. Miss Bessie tried to keep the two of us in order too, just like her account books, insisting that we had to turn over all the pieces and make the puzzle borders first before we could start the picture part. One afternoon Kibbie and I got to the table before Miss Bessie had come back from her nap. Kibbie whispered, -"Let's start the new puzzle with the colors in the middle, quick before Bess catches us."

Kibbie took care of me once when I was about ten years old and my folks went home after one week's vacation, letting me to stay there a second week under her supervision. My mother had left strict orders about how long a nap I was to have and when I was to go to bed at night, but Kibbie was my pal. She figured that if I just rested a little extra in the afternoon, then I could stay up later in the evening. We got away with all we could!

I loved the adults at Summer Rest, and was glad to be the only child. I got to enter into their world - much more satisfying than just playing with the other children back home. As I moved toward adolescence, though, it was awkward to be growing up before their eyes. I remember squirming with embarrassment at hearing jokes I didn't quite understand and not knowing whether I should laugh or not.

Our chief entertainment at night was parlor games - things like "Singing Hand-ker-chief," "Malagar Grapes," where we "in" folks knew all the secrets and had to initiate newcomers. Once in a while we got ambitious and danced the Virginia Reel. But I really got fed up with the adults when we did that! No matter how clear the instructions were, most of them were sure to get mixed up and do it wrong. I was only a kid and I could do it right. Why couldn't they? It was a while before I realized that their hit-and-miss style didn't matter at all, because everyone had a hilarious time. Including me.

There was a tired old nickelodeon there, and when I was older I learned to dance with my grown-up cousin Ruth. I can still sing the words to "Melancholy Baby" and "It Had to Be You." On Saturday nights the nearby farm boys came to dance with the city girls, but I was too young for that.

Then there was "dress-up!" There were wondrous old dresses, hats, feathers, beads in a big wardrobe and a huge trunk. We'd put on fashion shows and plays. One year when I was in my early teens I got to be Snow White, and all the other parts were filled mostly by the adults who acted their parts with great earnest-ness.

By then there were one or two other families with children, and my little cousin Shirley, Ruth's daughter, played Dopey with shirt sleeves drooping over her hands, and an older teen-age girl dressed up as the rescuing prince. I still remember her father as the woodsman and the evil look he assumed when he wielded his threatening kitchen knife to kill me for the wicked queen.

Having other men and children besides my father and me there didn't change things very much. It just made a bigger family, and, our entertainment stayed the same.

That same old school bell rung by Miss Sue, the manager, that woke us up also called to the dining room for all the meals. We assembled at the long tables quickly, ready for the heavenly food prepared by big Alice out in the kitchen at the huge, black wood stove. Every morning for breakfast, whatever else, there was steaming batter bread swimming in butter, biscuits lighter than any I've ever

had since, and frequently dark, rich beef hash to put over them. There was sausage and bacon, shad roe, all delicious, even the eggs, and I didn't usually like eggs. Sunday dinners were the best - fried chicken and fresh corn and fluffy rolls, and in season fresh peach ice cream, with peaches from the nearby orchard. Daddy and I used to crank the old ice cream freezer on the back porch outside the kitchen and smell the Sunday dinner cooking. We had to lick the dasher, of course, just to be sure the ice cream was as good as usual.

Each week new guests arrived in time for that Sunday dinner at noon, and no one would think of leaving until after dinner. So after the meal was over, out in the rocky path beyond the yard, where the cars were parked helter-skelter, there were greetings and farewells every Sunday. Departing friends planned to meet in Richmond during the winter, and often they actually did. Miss Sue, the manager through most of my years there, always put on a good show at departure times. She would drape her overweight figure in black "widow's weeds" from the dress-up wardrobe, big black hat with veil, and carry a huge bath towel to weep into. Her body bending in grief, she'd make her slow way to the gate to declare with sobs that she hated to see everyone go, as they had indeed been "the nicest crowd that's ever been to Summer Rest!" Next Sunday there would be a repeat performance to everyone's delight.

Vacations at Summer Rest were a time away from time, and I guess for most adults a time away from all the stress in their lives, including even physical ailments. Nobody was allowed to complain about how bad they felt, and if they did they had to put a quarter in the complaint jar. But the truth is, even the frailest people were in high spirits and seemed almost robust when they were at Summer Rest.

It was always hard for me to go home after a vacation there. It took some "re-entry" time to adjust to the usual at-home surroundings. I missed the peaceful beauty of the mountains, the predictable fun, and the people, especially Miss Bess and Kibbie at the jig-saw table. For me those visits were times of freedom and, for years, of course, a time of being the center of attention. All of that had the effect of giving me a certain confidence that I was O.K.

Summer Rest exists no more. It was demolished years ago. Yet, even so, and even if there are not many people living today who even remember what it was, it still exists in my mind. It's still beautiful and serene at the top of that huge lawn, surrounded by all those trees and meadows and mountains, and filled with sunshine, and contentment.

And I still love to work jigsaw puzzles - and I still have to start with the border first!

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

I can see crazy old Miz Stevenson now, running down Montrose Avenue, her white stringy hair falling out of her bone hairpins, shrieking to make the street car conductor wait. Often I'd already gotten on the car, and I'd cringe when I saw her come tearing across the Brooklyn Park Boulevard. I knew when she climbed on board she'd have some long involved story about why she didn't have carfare with her. I always got busy reading a book or looking out of the window pretending I didn't know her. But I'll bet every single conductor knew her!

When I was little, I truly wanted to be a streetcar conductor when I grew up. I loved all the mechanical stuff - the way they turned those big metal cranks to open and shut the doors. I liked all the noise as they made the car stop and go, and go faster. And especially I wanted to be able to manipulate that coin box and flip out change from the bottom. That ambition faded, though, one Christmas afternoon when my mother and I took the streetcar and I found the conductor eating his Christmas dinner out of a paper bag.

Miz Stevenson lived on the other side of the street from us, and you could hear her screaming at her girls inside their closed house from clear across the street in my living room. The grown-up daughters seemed to be perfectly normal, as far as I could tell. I had Mary Ellen for a homeroom teacher in junior high one year, and she was pleasant and agreeable. (Of course, I carefully called her Miss Stevenson in class.)

Next door to us, at the Holtzmans' there was some more bickering and shouting. Poor Cecil! Miz Holtzman and their grown daughter, Virginia, ordered him around all the time. Occasionally I'd hear him yell out, "All right, Babe." But the Holtzmans argued at such high pitch that I'd get upset. Mother would assure me it meant nothing. "It's just their way, Sweetie," she'd say. And before long they were outdoors acting like any other family.

But Cecil, a small wiry man with a placid face, never did anything right according to the women in his family. Red-headed Virginia did everything right. If the rest of us were bungling anything, Virginia knew how to do it better. She could always find a parking space down town because, we were told smugly, "She just watches for exhausts."

Miz Holtzman was an imposing looking woman, taller than Cecil, and heavier, with iron-gray hair drawn into a tuck at her neck. Once when I was a just a toddler,

so I'm told, I deliberately stomped on her tulips around a maple tree! My mother made me go ring her doorbell and tell her what I had done and apologize. She forgave me, but sternly warned me against doing anything like that again. She really was very kind to me, and I liked her all right. But I was a little afraid of her.

In their back yard was a grape arbor that smelled wonderful. I think of it every time I open a bottle of Welch's. The drawback, of course, was that bees loved being there even more than I did. I got so frightened once when I left her the back porch after borrowing some eggs, that I dropped the eggs, and then cried. Holtsie (that's what I called her) said, "Well, I hope your mother can use scrambled eggs." But she gave me some more.

She and my mother were good neighbors to each other, and they visited over the fence every time they both worked in their flowerbeds. They saw each other almost daily for 18 years, but they still called each other "Miz" Holtzman and "Miz" Gentry.

On the other side of our house were the Walshes. Minnie and Percy had three children, all older than I, Norvelle, Elizabeth and Ruth. But Ruth was only five years my senior and my big-girl idol. I adored her. I know I made a pest of myself hanging around her, but she never made me feel that way.

From her I learned a little bit about growing up. I watched her put on make-up and looked with envy when her breasts began to develop. When she was a teenager (in the days before "teenagers") she became something of a trend-setter. Her family got terribly upset when she had her hair cut into a boyish bob. They liked her dark red hair nice and long. I did too. To be honest, I didn't much like that short cut, but I did like the idea that she was spunky enough to have it done. Whatever, it was better than the straight bangs and cut-to-the-tip-of-the-ear treatment my dark hair got until I was a little older! When the movie, Gone the Wind, came out, Ruth went to her first Sunday picture show! They thought that was disgraceful! But that was a movie we had to have reserved tickets for, and Sunday was the only time she could get one. Still, it was a long time before I dared to do such a thing.

I loved being at Ruth's house. It was full of people - the three children, and when I was very little, Miz Walsh's old mother, Miz Betts. I can vaguely see her. I remember better Minnie's widowed sister, Lucille Bass, and more important to me, her friend Louise Bailey who boarded there.

Miss Bailey was my Sunday school teacher, and I thought she was wonderful. We'd walk together to church each Sunday morning, while she put on her kid gloves, finger by finger. When she had one glove on I knew we were halfway there, and by the time both were on, we were at the church, and she took them off to teach. I sat up in the balcony with her for worship service. By this time I guess I was adolescing and would rather be in public with anybody else than my own family!

Besides, I got lots of friendliness and attention from that entire household. For a while, when Daddy was very ill at home with a nurse around the clock, Mother sent me to Miz Walsh's for supper every night. I'm sure some money changed hands. But tight as money was in those later Depression days, my mother was relieved of preparing me a meal, and she gave me an opportunity to get out of a quiet, uneasy atmosphere, and into a more genial one. It was always fun to be at the Walshes' with everyone his or her usual entertaining self. The lively banter was exhilarating, even if the food was predictable. Whatever else, we had cabbage for every meal, without fail. Years later, Miz Walsh would see me around and ask, "Phyllis Ann, you want to come over for supper? We're having cabbage."

She was the neighborhood data gatherer. That is to say, she didn't miss a thing! Daddy used to say he thought she was twins. He'd go out to the front yard and could see her watching him from her chair at the dining room window; he'd go out in the back yard, and there she was at the kitchen window. What she didn't find out for herself she asked. A young child is not very good at evading personal questions.

Ruth was the one who held us kids together, and several summers we made a stage in her back yard by way of big sheets hanging on her mother's wash line, and under Ruth's direction we put on talent shows and even plays for the neighborhood. I got to play Dick Whittington when we staged Puss in Boots one year. My friend, Kat Harris who lived way up the street and had a houseful of cats, of course, got to play Puss. Our productions were well supported by the adults who, after all, didn't have much other entertainment to distract them.

But you could always count on them being around. Afternoons would find the women in freshly ironed dresses, sitting on their front porches, crocheting or tatting, or shelling peas for supper. If I played outdoors, I knew they were keeping an eye on me. I didn't dare do anything bad because my mother would know about it immediately. But, then, if I got hurt, she'd know that right away too.

Mr. Luck across the street got home from work early, and he'd sit on his porch too, tipped back in his straight chair with his bare feet resting on the railing. He wasn't shelling any peas. He was too busy making conversation with whoever walked by. He always had something friendly, and a tinge smart-alecky, to say to each person coming home from work in the evening. "Hi, there, Louise! Looks like you had a hard day at the office." He was totally uninhibited, and we wondered how he and his quiet wife, Doris, ever got together. But they made a good family, producing two active little boys, Bucky and Bobby. They were born when I was big enough to help keep an eye on them for their mother. (In those days nobody talked about babysitters.)

The other member of the household was Doris' father, old Mr. Miltz. He looked ancient to me, but he still went out to work every day at the glass company. He was even quieter than Doris, and very disciplined. He told Daddy that he had one cigarette a day, right after his lunch break, and no more. Eugene made up for the other adults with his informal ways and general exuberance.

My neighborhood for year was that end of Montrose Avenue. It was a safe place to grow up, and a good place, with playmates for every occasion. Our front yard rang out with the old games: "Tag! You're it!" "Fox in the water; all come across, one, two, three!" "Mother, may I?" "Simon Says," "Coming, ready or not!" Slinging Statues and Follow the Leader, our games were endless.

Every year someone's niece (I don't remember whose) would come to visit. She had lots of frizzy dark hair that always looked like it would be so hot on her neck. Zenobia was her name. I loved saying it: "Zenobia." After dark, she would get us neighborhood kids together around a dim street lamp and thrill us with ghost stories.

Daddy painted me a big board to be a schoolroom blackboard, so that on our back porch we could play school. I was always the teacher! And my playmates and I played house under the back steps at my place - Kitty, my favorite playmate, her bossy sister Florence, Kat who had all the kittens, chubby William from across the street, and Paul from a few doors away. As soon as Florence started trying to run everything, Paul would get fed up. He spoke of her as "Old Droopy Drawers," because she wore bloomers that showed, but he never called her that to her face. He thought William was a sissy, and often told him flat out, "William, go home and tell your mother she wants you." But Paul liked me.

He was three years older than I, and was my champion. Whenever we girls played dress-up, he always said I looked better than anyone else, and he and I spent many happy hours together. We ruined our comfortable living room sofa

by making diving leaps across the room onto it, until it was finally banished. It was replaced by a stiff, uncomfortable Queen Anne or something. We hated it!

Sometimes on Saturday afternoons, his father would take us along when he went to do some extra work at the beauty school he ran. While Mr. Shuford was busy, Paul and I pumped the barber chairs up and down and raced each other. My baby book is crowded with snapshots of Paul and me, remembered ever afterwards as my "childhood sweetheart." I got my first Valentine from him when I was two months old, and still have it.

I spent a lot of my time right across the street at William Gill's house, especially on hot summer days. William (he was never "Billy") was overweight. They had to buy his clothes in the men's department, and I see him to this day in his outsized yellow knickers.

William and I spent hours on his front porch playing Monopoly, the two of us, or Michigan 500, poker chips and all, with his grandmother, Miz Childress. Often he and I simply spent lazy time on that porch, one in the swing and the other sprawled on the comfortable wicker rocker, reading his Hardy Boys books. If his supply ran out, I had my own Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton. But, of course, he wouldn't touch them! Or if we wanted to be a little more active, we'd go out to the garage to "ride" his father's saw horses while we shot target guns, aiming rubber tipped missiles at the swinging light bulb.

I had my first "date" with William when we were both in junior high. All the Safety Patrols at school were given two free tickets to the Lowes Theater down town, and he invited me to go with him. His father drove and dropped us off at the front door. Once we were inside the theater William immediately saw some friends of his, and I saw some of my girl friends, so he and I didn't even sit together. But we came home together. Afterwards I made a big point of telling my family that now I had had my first date, so never again would they have reason to make a big fuss about my first date, when it really did happen!

I think William's grandmother must have ruled his household. She had very dark hair until her death, and we all noticed that shortly after she died William's mother, Bernice, let her very blonde hair return to its beautiful and natural white. Surely her mother had made her keep tinting it. But what Miz Childress said was law. Once when she was unwinding the crank to let down the awning over their porch, she commented, "It works much better now since George grez it." William corrected her. "Grandmother! It's greased it." Miz Childress persisted, "If I say George grez it, he grez it!" And that was that.

But they were a Catholic family - Gasp! And we Protestants, especially we Southern Baptists, had nothing to do with Catholics! Catholics were bad news! But as with every other prejudice, there were exceptions. We knew William's family, and liked them, and he and I played well together, so nobody said a word. . . . We can work out things when it suits us, can't we?

Most of my time I spent with Kitty Tiller. She lived across the street, catty-cornered from us in a house that had wisteria all over the front porch. Kitty and I were Best Friends. She and I played together a lot better when her older sister, Florence, wasn't trying to boss us around. But there were days when Kitty and I parted with, "I'm never going to play with you again as long as I live!" "Me neither!" And then, an hour or so later, she'd be back at our front door, "Miz Gentry, can Phyllis Ann come out?"

I got caught in an embarrassing situation once when Kitty and I were older and went to a big formal high school press banquet. Most of the girls went with dates - or at least in our state of low confidence, we assumed they did. We didn't. It was a formal affair though, so we wore our long dresses and felt glamorous. Then Kitty's grandmother handed us each a little corsage she had made to match the color of our dresses. We didn't want them, but couldn't tell her so. You don't wear flowers when they're not from a boy! We knew that. So as soon as her father let us out in front of the school, we went inside and took them off and hid them on the stop shelf of a coat rack.

After the meal, a photographer from the local paper took formal pictures of the assembled editorial staffs of the newspaper and the literary magazine. I was in one of them, and felt pretty important. But next morning, there I was in the Richmond Times Dispatch in my evening gown - and no corsage! I seem to remember that Kitty and I got out of that by explaining to her grandmother that, since none of the other magazine staff were wearing flowers, I didn't want to make them feel bad, and took mine off! Fortunately, we did remember to bring them home.

When I was very little, I could ride my tricycle or scooter on the sidewalk only as far from home as the vacant lot across from Kitty's house, and no farther. That was my neighborhood. But later when I was older the neighborhood expanded, and that whole long block of Montrose Avenue, from the Boulevard on the south clear up the hill to Ladies' Mile Road on the north was our territory. We'd make a chain on our skates and come whizzing down the sidewalk, until one of us got a skate hung up in a crack in the cement or went off into the grass and the whole line would tumble. In one of the houses we passed on that stretch of Montrose, there may be to this day behind a loose brick at the front porch a

serious Sworn Document that several of us drew up for the purpose of making a Deathless Promise - about what I cannot remember. We meant to sign it in blood, but we used Mercurochrome instead.

Ruth and I may be the only ones left now from that lower part of Montrose Avenue. If any of the others are still living, I've lost track of them long ago. But she and I try to get together whenever I go to Richmond.

None of us from that neighborhood ever became famous - or infamous, either. But I'll never forget those folks. And now after all these years, with most of them gone, maybe it would be all right if I embroidered a little and told some of our stories my way. We'll see.

GRANNY GENTRY

Granny Gentry. That's what we called her. She was my Daddy's father's mother. She was the oldest person I knew when I was little.

To tell you the truth, I never knew much about her, except what I noticed on visits. But I do have a blown-up snapshot, which confirms my memory of what she looked like. She was a nice old lady, with a pleasant face, and white hair piled on top of her head. In my photo she sits primly in a straight-backed chair, in her black dress and white lace collar, her hands folded in her lap. That's just the way I remember her.

From the picture, I can see the family resemblance. Her straight nose and "Gentry" eye-brows show me where some of my relatives' features and some of my own, came from. She also was an early part of a legacy in the Gentry family that continued for at least two generations after her, of living a long time. She died at age-eighty-seven, which I guess was pretty old in those days.

Form as far back as I can remember, I never knew her as anything but an old lady, but an old lady who was held in some reverence and certainly much respect. My mother and father would take me to see her occasion-all-y, and if it was summer time, I always had to change out of shorts and halter and put on a sundress. Nothing fancy, but we looked nice to go to see Granny Gentry.

I don't remember much about visits to her house, but I do remember her Yo-Yo quilts! She made them out of scraps of materials cut into 3" or 4"-inch disks, stitched loosely around the edges, then the stitches gathered until the cloth doubled onto itself. That way it formed puffy disks about 2" in diameter, with a tiny hole around the gathering in the center. You've seen Yo-Yo quilts. She sewed the pieces together at the edges, and added backing. Her quilts were colorful and fun to see, and full of life.

But I remember Uncle Errett, my father's brother-in-law, kidding us about taking scraps of cloth to Granny Gentry. "That poor old lady," he used to say. "Why can't she have some decent bolts of cloth for a change? All she gets is bits and pieces!"

But she did wonderful things with those bits and pieces, and for a while I had one of Granny Gentry's Yo-Yo quilts of my very own. But that was years and years ago, and with all the moves and all the deaths in the family, and with my

moving away, that quilt went off somewhere I didn't go. What I wouldn't give to have it now; it would be a real treasure to cherish and then pass on.

Instead I just pass on this recollection.

MA and PA

She was Minnie Hechler Gentry and he was Newton Lafayette Gentry, but everybody called them "Ma" and "Pa." And as soon as I hear the names, I can see them in their living room, Pa dozing off in the corner there, and Ma ensconced in her big black rocker, with those outsized black hearing aids clamped to her head, rocking on a squeaky board and always busy with her fingers.

She made all kinds of things, crocheted doilies, patchwork quilts, or most often in my memory artificial flowers out of what we used to call "stretchy paper." You know, crepe paper? She had a supply of pink, red, yellow, green, and knew exactly how to cut out the petal shapes. Then she'd stretch and mold them into precisely the right curves she wanted, and let them fall onto the big spread of her lap. Then she'd cut the green crepe paper just so, twist it around a wire, and somehow add on those petals - and as if by magic - flowers! - with proper stems - just perfect! I really wanted to be able to do that, and she tried to teach me, but my clumsy fingers did a better job of tearing the papers than shaping them.

Ma was a rather large woman who seemed to me when I was a child to be overflowing that big rocking chair. She had very dark hair with never more than a trace of gray all her life. She wore wire-rimmed glasses and had a stern set to her lips. She really didn't look all that pleasant, but I know she enjoyed life, and laughed a lot.

But I was never sure where I stood with her. My older cousin, Frances, was her pet; that was obvious. It's not that she made me feel uncomfortable, but I just don't remember any waves of warm feelings coming from her, or any hugs either.

But I did like being at her house, and even when I was very young, I enjoyed watching her and Pa. As Ma rocked and made things and talked with the rest of us, Pa would like as not be sitting bolt upright in a straight chair, his long bony fingers interlaced across his flat stomach, head dropped on his chest, dead to the world. But just let Ma say something not quite right, and he'd raise his head a bit, and mutter under his breath: "Not a word of truth to that; she's got it all wrong."

Pa was a butcher in a local grocery store. He walked to and from work and everywhere else. You could see his long-legged thin body, ramrod straight, striding most anywhere in our part of town. He was usually wearing only in a suit, with maybe a felt hat on his sparse graying hair, but never a topcoat, even in cold weather. My folks told me that he wore long johns and didn't need a coat.

It didn't seem to me that he needed teeth either. I don't think I ever saw a tooth in his head, but he ate almost everything - everything except nuts. We always gave him hard candy for birthdays and Christmas, along with some black-berry wine. (And, come to think of it, this from a family of teetotalers!)

Pa had strong opinions on two subjects. One was that too many baths were weakening and unhealthy; the other was that nothing would give you a good night's sleep like a big cup of strong, black coffee.

He seemed to have lots of energy around the house - but then he had all those naps to refuel him! But his energy made for a constant bother to Ma. How many times did he paint that kitchen! And he never consulted her beforehand. And I'm pretty sure from the looks of things, he never scraped the walls first either!

Then, with no warning, the same day, he could turn into an invalid. I remember him lying on the sofa, sure he was dying, and groaning in pain, "Lordy! Lordy!" Nobody ever seemed very concerned. But maybe that's because a little while later, it would all be over, and we'd look around to see where he'd gone, and like as not, we'd find him out in the front yard cutting the grass.

Ma's life was more orderly than that. She spent a lot of her time in that living room, often listening to the radio with another set of huge earphones, probably tuned to her very favorite, Kate Smith. Nobody could say anything against Kate Smith! She was the best! That was Ma's opinion, and there was no point in trying to shake it.

Like Shirley Temple! She loved Shirley Temple! When Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarves came out, all the rest of us were so excited to get to see the first full-length car-toon! It was a marvel. Ma liked it all right, but she scoffed, "Humph! That girl can't act any-where near as good as Shirley Temple!" "But, Ma!" we said, "It's only a cartoon!" She got that set, convinced look on her face: "I don't care!" and that was that.

Ma's other domain was the kitchen, when Pa wasn't painting it! I can almost smell it now, steamy with wonderful aromas. She made the best lemon squares, and the best pies of anyone, especially buttermilk pie and pecan pie - two varieties I never eat now because I know no one will be able to make them as good as hers were. The only thing I ever saw her fail at was homemade ice cream. She made terrible ice cream! It was all thin and granular. But she kept on turning it out, and we'd eat it and pretend we liked it.

The very best thing she made in that kitchen was her dinner rolls. They won lots of state fair blue ribbons, along with her pies and chutney and other creations. Those rolls were complete perfection - light and airy (a whole basketful didn't weigh anything!) They were about four inches in diameter, but seemed larger. And they almost floated out of the oven, all warm and crusty. I remember how Frances and I would sit on either side of the kitchen table, knives in hand, ready. Then we vied with each other, to see how many of Ma's rolls dripping with butter we could eat at one sitting. (We were both skinny in those days!) She ate sixteen once - the all-time record.

It may be that the world revolved around that house for Ma. The first time the State of Virginia introduced Daylight Savings Time, I remember her scorn: "All foolishness! Messing with God's time like that!" God's time was, of course, whatever time it was in Richmond. I don't know if she would have believed it if we'd tried to convince her that, when we were eating breakfast, people out in California were still asleep in the dark.

But Ma didn't stay in that house all the time; she got out in style! - not walking like Pa, but in her own Model 'T' Ford. It was all decked out with orange and green striped awnings over each side window. We could hear her coming from blocks away in that Ford. "Here comes Ma!" we'd shout!

But she had her ailments to slow her down too, though hers were not so sudden and melodramatic as Pa's spells. She burned Asmador powers in a dish in her lap and breathed in the fumes to open up her lungs. They said she had asthma, but it might have been emphysema, since that's what two of her children had, and, whatever it was, that's what eventually killed her.

Ma died while Frances and I were away at college together. We remembered her as really elderly by then, but I recently learned that she was just 72 when she died, and that sounds young to Frances and me now.

Frances' father had died some time ago, and after Ma died, she and her mother, my Aunt Edith, lived for years with Pa in that old house. But it was never the same.

In spite of all those times he knew he was dying, Pa lived to be 98, finally leaving us after only a brief illness.

A few years ago, as we were clearing out our relics, preparing to move, I pored through my college scrapbook to see what I might find worth saving. Much to my astonishment, I came across two letters from Ma, written just to me at

college, not to Frances and me together. They started with, "Dear Phyllis Ann," were full of news and very friendly, and they were signed, "Lots of love, Ma." Maybe I counted with her for more than I thought.

I guess I never really knew Ma. But I'm glad I can still see her sitting in her big black rocker on the squeaky floorboard, with those ear-phones in place, and those colorful petals falling into her lap while Pa sleeps -in the straight-backed chair.

MY DADDY

H. E. GENTRY SIGNS. I can see my Daddy's sturdy hands signing his name in black paint with one of his fine sable brushes. His hands were dark from the sun, with his long, "artistic" fingers squared off at the ends with perfectly trimmed, clean nails. They were always clean, no matter how much paint he'd been using. And he painted his name in block letters at the bottom of whatever sign he was making at the time, whether on a storefront window, an office door or a panel truck.

I used to see that signature in little towns all through Virginia long after my father died. Wherever there was an A.B.C. Store (that's Alcoholic Beverage Control), you could be sure it sported a handsome gold-leaf sign to identify it, with my father's name at the bottom. That was his bread and butter for years. If he wasn't busy with other sign jobs, he could always decide it was time to go to some Virginia town and retouch or re-varnish that A. B. C. sign to keep it in good shape.

I guess he did his last work around the state in the early '60s, so I suppose those signs are all gone now. I wonder about real sign painters, in these days of stick-on letters and posters done at Kinko's. There are still sign painters today, but my father was special, and he would be special even now. He didn't come cheap, because he used real gold, but mostly because he was an artist at his trade. He rightfully had the reputation of being the best sign painter in Virginia.

During the Depression he lost his job at a Richmond sign company, and later went into business for himself, where he either had long stretches of no work at all, or had so much to do, he could hardly keep up. The Central National Bank in town was his steady customer, and he did all their office door lettering. ABC stores came later.

During the '30s and '40s, the bright upstairs sunroom in our house became his studio, with windows lining the north and west sides. That meant it was so hot you couldn't stand it on summer afternoons. But mornings were a good time for work, and he'd stand long hours or sit on a high stool in front of his big, adjustable artist's table, tilted to just the angle.

Afternoons he'd use to go looking for work, driving our dark blue Pontiac with the colorful ad he'd painted on the spare tire cover - a burst of rainbow colors arranged much like the NBC peacock tail logo; bearing the words:

Signs of the Times

H. E. GENTRY

Signs on Anything

After a prolonged illness, when he wasn't supposed to do heavy lifting, my mother went with him to his jobs. He'd carry his rolled up patterns and mahl stick and other equipment, and she'd tote his sign painter's kit. It was heavy, filled with wondrous supplies that I coveted. I remember it as being about 1-1/2 feet square, dark wood well worn from many years' use, paint spattered and sturdy, with a smooth wooden handle on top. Tied onto the handle was a tiny brass key for unlocking the front panel. Once that was lifted off, he could take out the paint pallet inside, and get access to the banks of tiny wooden drawers. Inside those drawers were dozens of tubes of paint, all sorted by color. There was also a little rectangular metal cup that clipped onto the pallet, and my father taught me to fold up 3x5 cards to make the lining for the cup so he could squeeze into it a small amount of color from the right tube.

While he worked at home when I was little, I played in my Daddy's studio amid the smell of paint and varnish, and with the sound of The Breakfast Club and Arthur Godfrey playing on his little Philco radio. I got to draw pictures with any supplies he'd let me use. My father liked to see me draw because he was in some ways a frustrated artist. (You notice he worked in what he called his "studio," not his workroom.) Somewhere today there must be still two paintings he made, one of General Pershing in profile, another of three horses standing under a tree, with two legs of one horse completely hidden by another horse, so that he always had to explain about that "two-legged horse."

Frequently on Sunday afternoons he took me to the Virginia Museum of Art where he pointed out to me all the photo-graphi-cally accurate details in the paintings he especially liked. Everything we stopped to look at was surely dated before the era of "modern art," and as far as I knew that's the only thing there was in that museum. But anything later than that was not realistic enough for him.

There were certain jobs I got to do for Daddy when "we" worked in his studio. The first step for most any job was to make a pattern, and he began that process

by mounting a large piece of brown or white paper to his artist's table with thumbtacks. He measured and marked on each end of the paper exactly how where the top and bottom of each line of letters was supposed to be. I waited for the time when he was ready to make the straight lines connecting those pairs of marks so as to line up the letters by, because I would get to "snap the lines." I remember the ritual well. He had a broken ball of blue chalk (probably round when it was new, and a bit larger than golf ball). He passed a long string through the chalk, making more deep cuts in it. But when the string was coated with chalk, then got to hold one end of it in place at one of the marks on my side of the pattern. Once he knew I was in the right place, he put his end on the corresponding mark on his side. Then with the string stretched tight, I got to pull it away from the paper and let it go. "Snap!" It hit the paper hard enough to leave a faint straight line.

That was the first step. Next came something I could not help with at all, but I remember watching my father do it and never once questioning how he could be so good at it and so sure of himself. He drew freehand each of the letters with a hard (#3) Faber pencil that he sharpened with a razor blade until the point was longer and more pointed than any pencil sharpener could ever make it. (I rammed one into my palm one day, and still have a faint dark mark to prove it.)

Of course, if the job called for a particular style of lettering that was especially fancy or intricate, he would search through his vast collection of alphabets stacked on the floor of his studio. When he found a good example, he'd either trace the letters, or look at them carefully and copy them by hand. He was good at that!

Then came the perforation of the pattern. The little wheel on a handle he used was similar to the sewing implement for marking patterns. He ran the wheel carefully around every letter on the paper, leaving tiny holes. When I was older he trusted me to do that, but even when I was very young I was the one who "pounced" the pattern. The perforated pattern was taped in place tightly on the board that was to be lettered. Then He'd let me take his little cloth bag of chalk dust, of of charcoal depending on the need for color contrast, and pounce all over the paper pattern, so that when it was removed from the board, all the letters showed clearly in outline.

From that point on, all the rest was his own handwork, done with the aid of his mahl stick. That was about two feet long. He held on one end with his left hand, while the other end, padded, rested at a slant on the sign. That's how he could steady his right hand so he could fill in the solid letters with his fine brushes and paints.

But if the sign was to be gold lettering, there was more involved. I remember the procedure well. Once the letters were visible from the pounce bag, he painted them exactly as they were going to look. But he did it, not with paint, but with "sizing." He made this from melted down empty gelatin capsules. He held the sizing in a little metal cup that fitted on a left-hand finger, much like the ring cup a dentist uses to clean teeth, only this was larger. After sizing in all the letters, and before they dried, while they were still "tacky," he was ready to put on the gold leaf.

The gold came in little booklets of thin brick red paper, about 5" square, I guess, with delicate leaves of gold interspersed between the pages. This was fragile stuff, and he had to remind me not to breathe hard around it, or move suddenly, so it wouldn't fly all over. He used a flat, broad camel's hair brush, about 5" wide and not much more than a few hairs' thickness. First he swept this back and forth through his black hair in order to give the brush static electricity, so the gold would cling to it. Then all he had to do was lay the brush flat on top of a leaf of gold, and he could lift and transfer it onto the surface of the sized letters where it stuck. As long as everything that he'd put sizing on was completely covered with gold, it didn't matter that the letters looked messy with pieces of gold overlapping or bits of it hanging loose around the edges.

That's because, once the sign was completely dry, he could just lightly wipe over the surface with a wad of soft absorbent cotton and remove all the loose gold. He did this very carefully, because he swept it up into an envelope to save it. He even combed his hair after a job and brushed his bushy eyebrows and his dark five o'clock shadow to rescue any bits of gold that might have been left there, and added them. He saved it all year long, and used the money each Christmas to buy something special that he or my mother wanted, a luxury they could not otherwise afford.

The sign was finished when he outlined each letter in a fine black line or painted in the background of the sign, and varnished over the letters.

My father was just a sign painter, but his signs were works of art. And I can't even regret it that, with one exception, I have no idea where any of his equipment is today. That's because I can remember everything so clearly, and can almost re-live what it felt like to be that little girl helping my Daddy.

He thought for sure that, with all that background and experience, I'd grow up to be an artist, and I did take art all through junior high and high school, and even did some art work on some of his jobs. But these days everybody else in my

my family is an artist, not me. My husband makes three-dimensional structures in our garage. Our older daughter is an art conservator dealing with works on paper. Our younger daughter is especially good with watercolors and whimsical cartoon-like drawings.

Their brother is trying to make it as a full-time "real" artist. And I know my father would be pleased at that, and especially pleased that way out in Seattle, he does much of his work on that same old artist's table from that second-floor sunny studio.

NANNIE
and the
DILLARD GIRLS

I always used to think that, if she could just move into more cheerful quarters, her life would be more cheerful. Then I'd enjoy visiting her more. But my mother's mother, Nannie, lived in a series of dreary West-End "flats" in Richmond that were inter-change-ably drab as I remember them.

Mother's only unmarried sister, Bessie, lived with their mother. She went out to work each day at The Home Beneficial Insurance Company, where some of her sisters worked. Bessie always had something wrong with her, sinus infection, aches, strange unidentified ailments that seemed to plague her and produce in her voice a permanent minor tone. I can't remember her ever dressing in anything but neutral colors, and her face was a picture of her low expectations and resignation. Maybe she's the one I really wanted to cheer up for Nannie's sake.

My grandmother was cheerful enough, but she just seemed to exist with nothing much punctuating her days, as far as I could tell. All my memories of her and her space are of the characterless bleak, grayed-out wallpapered halls and rooms of those upstairs dark apartments, with their bare-bones kitchens and worn linoleum on the floors.

Besides that, she dressed the part. Tall and thin, with her gray hair swept up into a knot on top of her head, she wore housedresses that all looked the same to me. To this day, I will never wear small black and white flower prints. They would just remind me of the no-style, colorless clothes she wore.

Every Wednesday, as regularly as my mother's bi-weekly finger waves, she and I went to Nannie's and took her to the cemetery so they could attend to Willie and Harvey's graves, and then drive her back home so Mother could clean house for her.

I never knew for sure that my grandmother was ill; it was Bessie who had all the physical complaints. But somewhere along the way Nannie seemed to have developed a life-long inability to cope.. My mother, the oldest girl with five sisters and one brother, had apparently had responsibility for the household while she was growing up. But all the "girls" pitched in through the years to help out Poor Nannie." Once they were working, they took turns coming by on their lunch breaks to keep her company, and when we were there on Wednesdays, they all came over for the mid-day meal prepared by my mother, probably something substantial like cubed steak, batter bread and snaps cooked all morning.

That was the best part of Wednesdays for me, because I liked my aunts, and life got a little more exciting with them around. My chief enjoyment from that whole family, besides my own mother, came from my mother's sisters. Even Bessie with whom I never did relate in a warm, cozy way, did get out into the world and have some contact with life beyond those dim walls. The sisters who didn't work at Home Beneficial with her were at Powers-Taylor Drug Co. Some of them worked at both places in turn, and as far as I know, they did clerical work, keeping records, filling orders and performing general office duties.

I never knew their father, Willie Dillard, who had died relatively young. I've seen pictures of him, a portly gentleman with an impressive Roman nose, which was passed on to Bessie, Louise and Margaret. Nannie had been left a widow with a lot of children, and that may well have contributed to the "Poor Nannie" epithet. How Willie provided for her after his death, I have no idea, but none of the girls finished high school as they had to go to work instead.

The one man left in the family was the eldest child, Harvey. But he had been killed during the first World War, and the women never stopped singing his praises. He was probably a good person, but through the years his character seems to have taken on a patina of perfection. Harvey may well have been the star of hope for that family.

If I ever met his son Harvey, I don't remember it. There's no one to check with now, but I seem to recall that his widowed mother was cool to our family. Who knows? I wouldn't be surprised if Nannie and the sisters had decided she wasn't good enough for their Harvey, as if anyone could be. During World War II someone sent me a newspaper clipping of Harvey Jr. in uniform, a fair, slight young man, surely "handsome just like his father."

My mother, Evelyn, was the oldest of the daughters - but hers is another story. Next came Margaret. Tall and prematurely white-haired like my mother, with a frank, open face and ready smile, she was the sensible, get-it-done person, outspoken and honest. She was efficient, and it was amazing to watch her in operation. She could come into the house from her job at Powers-Taylor, hang up her coat, march right into her small kitchen, and in less than half an hour, she'd have a hot supper on the table, veal cutlet, chicken or some other hot meat, potatoes and a vegetable probably from a can. We always had something for dessert, because her husband Eugene would want it. So there was Jell-o or custard or even ice cream every evening. Margaret was the practical one, and everyone came to rely on her after my mother died. When that happened and my Dad and I were left alone, she boarded us at that little bungalow in a quiet

neighborhood on the north side of Richmond. It was a pleasant experience for us all. I liked her and my Uncle Gene and especially his dry wit. They're the ones who built a place on the Rappahannock River and named it "Plum Nelly," because, they explained, "We 'plum nelly' wore ourselves out building it!" They never had children, and after Margaret died with Alzheimer's, Gene's entire savings had been all but wiped out in caring for her. But he did have enough from the sale of that little house to get him into a retirement apartment where he lived out his life. At his request in those last years, he received audio tapes of my Sunday morning services which he often shared with Lil, Mother's youngest sister.

But next in line was Louise. She quit work at the Home Beneficial to start a family, and she lived to see her daughter Anne grow up and make a bad marriage. Louise and her good-natured husband Frank made room in their cramped little house in the suburbs and helped Anne raise her two girls after she moved back home. In later years Louise became less and less able to function, with rheumatoid arthritis that made her joints swell painfully. Even so, she usually had a bright smile on her round face and a good outlook. She too developed Alzheimer's and had to be put into a nursing home. Anne kept house for her father until he died, and she and one daughter still live in that house.

Ida Mae had been my playmate when I was a little girl. She sat on the floor with me, and we cut out paper dolls and played games together. I loved her a lot and later came to admire the way she made the best of a difficult marriage. George was a good man, but never could keep a job. Once he disappeared for almost a week with no word, until he finally phoned to say he had a job in New York, and Ida Mae joined him - the first time anybody in the whole family had ever moved away from Richmond. They were soon back, and managed to stay together in spite of his failing health and more job losses. And they made a fairly good life for their children, Bobby and Linda.

Ida Mae was not as tall as some of her sisters, and had a pretty face and smile much like my mother's. But she did nothing to enhance her appearance, usually pulling her light brown hair back into a tight knot on her neck, and never dressing with any care or wearing any makeup. But for her children's weddings, she was made to go to the beauty parlor and have her hair done and to get a new dress. She was one of those people of whom you could say, "She cleans up right pretty!"

Ida Mae's major flaw was that she talked--incessantly-without-pausing-for-breath-andneverknew-whentoshutup. It was a nervous habit, and we all put up with it. But when my mother was ill, Ida Mae

made the best nurse, sitting quietly with her for hours and, without talking, seeing to her needs. George died before all that, but Ida Mae lived long enough to enjoy babysitting her grand-children.

Lil was the youngest of the Dillard girls. Yes, Nannie had named one child Elizabeth ("Lil"), and another Bessie after herself. An attractive blonde, coming of age during the Flapper era, Lil had been the black sheep of the family, getting herself a wild reputation, much to my puritanical mother's dismay. She was the target of many of Mother's sermons to get her to shape up. I remember her dresses being much flashier than her sisters' and her make up and jewelry just a bit overdone. Of course she smoked, and she drank! Just as we feared, she was drunk at my wedding and noisy, but the "girls" kept her under control, and I was not aware. In spite of her reputedly wanton ways, she seemed to have a good marriage to Raymond. But he never had much to do with family gatherings, so I didn't know him well.

It may actually have been Lil's "riotious living" that caused her health problems later. She had an ileostomy for many years, and it always gave her trouble. Frequently she had to call on one of her sisters to make an emergency run to her suburban bungalow to help repair the damage. Through it all, and through illnesses that plagued her, she kept a remarkable sense of humor. Keeping up a correspondence she had started with me when I went off to college, she passed along the latest joke or made fun of her complaints: "My boyfriend, old Arthur Riffs, is visiting me today! Let me tell ya kiddo - old age ain't much fun." She always signed her letters, "Your withered old Aunt Lil."

After Eugene died, at her request, I sent weekly tapes from our church services to her in a nursing home where she had a room. I also sent her a hymnbook, and she wrote, "I go to church on Saturday morn-ing," meaning she listened to the tapes then, and sang along. She was a big fan of my preaching, and every now and then I'd get a scrawled note of commentary, full of apologies for misspellings and bad grammar, but fun to read because it sounded exactly the way she talked. If there was a sermon she had particularly liked, I'd get a "You're good, kid!" and she got familiar with seminary students who worked with me from year to year, often making comments about how they or one of the lay leaders did their part in the service. She recognized voices on the tapes and said she pictured all of us. So occasionally I'd send her snap shots so she could see "her" church family.

Lil lived into her late '80s, and was the last daughter to die, all her sisters having died in order of seniority. Lil's was the only funeral I ever preached for my family, and I was glad to tell some of these things about her, and about her love

of life and her great sense of humor. In spite of my mother's judgments upon her, Lil was a good person and a favorite of mine!

The Dillard "girls" were fun, but without them Nannie's flat was nowhere I wanted to go, in spite of the fact that Nannie was very good to me, and obviously took pleasure in my visits. She made me feel more welcome than Ma did. But I'd much rather have visited at Ma's house, because it was a real home; Nannie's was just living quarters.

My grandmother was another long-lived relative, and my mother died years before she did. Nannie lived long enough to meet my husband Bill and she liked him, though she really thought "Bill" was a poor excuse for a name; her husband had been "Willie," and that was more like it! She attended our wedding, and was interested in my going off to graduate school with Bill. But when I became pregnant with our first child and couldn't wait to tell people, I went to see her on a trip home, sporting a stylishly flared maternity top. Nannie was a little disturbed. She told me she could never get excited about being pregnant. (Well, I guess if you have as many babies as she did, every one can't be a big novelty.) She described in great detail how she carefully let out the seams of her clothes a bit at a time, so she could conceal her pregnancy as long as possible. And here I was showing off mine! To tell you the truth, I was surprised to hear she had ever been so industrious! Nannie died in her late '80s, having lived long enough to meet our first daughter, Lyn.

Years later, after my mother's death, and my father's re-marriage, his new wife, Mary, reported her impression of my grandmother. She had known my mother's family in her childhood. About ten years younger than Mother, Mary was, as my father explained, "that little yellow-haired gal I used to slip a quarter to, to get her to go away and let me court your mother! " So Mary knew Nannie well in the old days, and what she told me was that she never knew such a lazy woman in all her life! She said Nanny was very nice and nice to her, but Mary remembered my mother doing most the work that got done in that house long ago. And the vivid picture she had of my grandmother was of her stretched out on the sofa reading a book, while "the girls" took care of things.

MOTHER

I like to picture my mother stooping down in her flower bed, trowel in hand, digging around the Sweet William and Ageratum and Lemon Verbena I probably gave her for a Mother's Day or birthday present. Her white hair - I hardly remember her with dark hair - is finger-waved. Remember how that was done? Combed into shape in setting lotion. When it dried, the perfect waves were there to stay until she combed them out days later. My Dad used to say they were "shellacked." But that's the way women had their hair done in those days, for twenty-five or fifty cents at the beauty parlor. My Mother had it done every two weeks, even after she cut off her long hair, trading the bun at the nape of her neck for a younger looking short bob.

My mother was one of the tall Dillard girls, taller than Daddy. But she moved with ease. She folded up her long legs and stooped down or knelt in that border and got up again with no effort. In fact, every day, just to keep agile, she made a point of sitting on the floor to pull on her stockings and attach them to the garters on her girdle, and then put on her old-lady tie-up shoes. They were the only kind she could get that stayed on her narrow feet.

If it was afternoon, by then she had changed out of her housedress, freshened up and put on a cool pastel print before Daddy came home from work. But she was in that garden every time she got a few free minutes. She'd linger in the back yard, having gone out after doing the supper dishes just to walk to the alley gate and "dump the scraps" in the garbage can. But on the way back, she'd catch sight of a weed or a stray blade of grass, and half an hour later, there she was, still out there. "Mama's talking to her flowers," Daddy used to say.

She probably was, and she may well have been happier with her flowers than anywhere else. She could tell her plants anything, and she wouldn't put her foot in her mouth. That wasn't true in some other places. Or at least my Mother thought it wasn't. She felt safe at her mother's apartment or her sisters' homes. All of them accepted each other and didn't take offense at the least little misunderstanding. But at my other grandmother's house, none of us ever knew on any day of the week which of the three sisters were on speaking terms. She (Ma), and great aunts Tee Tee and Nellie, were usually two against one, but the sides changed, and without knowing the latest division, any of us could say the wrong thing! Mother chose to keep quiet.

At home, it was almost always "en-garde" time, but not with Daddy and me. Once a wise man told me that when there's a difficult family member to deal with, it often has the effect of strengthening the bonds within the rest of the family. That's surely what happened to us.

The three of us lived in Tee Tee's house, and even when I was little I sensed that Mother wasn't always happy there. Later I learned that during the Depression, when Tee Tee was the only one with a steady job, and because she so doted on her nephew, my Daddy, she took the two of them in and gave them a nice house to live in for a small rent. And there they stayed, year after awkward year, never having their own home, never able to do it all their way, and always expected to be grateful.

Of course I never knew all that when I was very young. All I felt was love from all of them. When I was born, they all rejoiced together. Tee Tee used to tell me, "We were dead and didn't know it until you came along." I reveled in the attention. Growing up I had no idea what a near impossibility my Mother must have had, trying to bring me up as her little girl, with Tee Tee always there. Early on I learned how to play one of them off against the other, as little children can do so well. If Mother said, "No," I could get either a "Yes" from Tee Tee, or at least sympathy and a promise of a treat later.

Years after-wards, when I had experienced three weeks of Tee Tee in our house when our first child was born, I realized how hard it must have been for my Mother from the very beginning even to lay claim to me as her own! It's a wonder I turned out as well as I did, but I knew what Mother expected of me, and I knew she was proud of me. When years later she lay dying, her sister Louise said to me, "You know you're her eyeballs, don't you?" But that was a long time away.

From as far back as I can remember, Mother read to me. I preferred to have Daddy read me the funnies, but wanted her to read everything else, and she did – children's stories and poems, and she taught me to recite poetry. I could "read" the entire "A Visit from St. Nicholas" word for word before I was three, or so it was said. Whenever I was sick in bed she would read by the hour from long books, The Bobbsey Twins, and the Miss Minerva books, until her voice gave out, and I never wanted her to quit. They said I used to say, "Momma, do like this: hhrrr." And she'd clear her through and read some more.

Later when I began to study literature in junior high and high school, I'd bring home my books and read to her, especially poetry. And when I wrote my own poems she was often the only person I'd let see them. How I wish she could

have had more schooling. She had a good mind and loved to read, and she collected, in a crammed-full scrapbook, clippings of stories and poems she especially liked. But she had to quit before high school to go to work in one of the offices where her sisters later worked too, one after the other. The "Dillard girls" were reliable employees.

When my parents were married at the end of the World War, after the great flu epidemic which almost killed both of them, I suppose keeping house for Daddy and Tee Tee to supplement the rent must have seemed like a sensible plan. The house cleaning, laundry, sewing and meals were my Mother's domain, with little chubby Geneva to come in and clean and do the heavy wash, and tall gangly Hattie to come in and iron. I remember how nice they were to me, and in those years how "good" we were to our "colored help." Never once did we question how we expressed our kindness to them in gifts of cast-off clothes, or how we took the precaution of providing separate dishes for them, never to be washed or stored with those of the family. I was brought up, like most Southern kids, to be nice to the "colored people," and corrected when I used pejorative words about them. I also remember being corrected once when I spoke of "a colored lady." No. "Woman." I grew up believing, as the accepted fiction taught, "They're the happiest people on earth!"

I wonder how long it would have taken my Mother to change her deeply embedded attitude. She died before it became a matter of public debate and conscience. But if her church had begun to have enlightened conversations on the subject, I'm sure she would have listened and learned, and even changed.

Her religious faith was the backbone of her life. While Daddy and Tee Tee stayed home on Sunday mornings, she always took me to Sunday school and church. The faith she consequently passed on to me, though it's certainly not like my faith today, gave her strength for every day. And her example started me off right. Her King James Bible fell apart from frequent reading of those thin pages. She prayed every day, and taught me to pray. And I'm sure she must have prayed for strength to live as a Christian woman in spite of Tee Tee.

But it couldn't have been easy. I'd hear Tee Tee brag about Mother's cooking to other people, but Mother never heard it. My aunt would get up from eating one of our tasty meals without a "Thank you," or a compliment of any kind. Of course, Daddy and I more than made up for her lack! But I saw Mother's dismay when she'd have supper all ready to put on the table as soon as Tee Tee got home from work, only to have her arrive bringing in fresh vegetables she expected to be prepared on the spot. And I remember well how at least once each year, with no warning, she'd come home from work on a Friday afternoon

bringing a bushel of damson plums, with the confidence that Mother would spend all day Saturday making preserves, no matter what her own plans might have been.

Our mealtime conversations could be volatile, and I never knew what might set off an opinion of hers that conflicted with what Mother thought. I wonder now how any of us could stand the strained exchanges and touchy atmosphere of those meals. Mother was likely to register her displeasure in silence, while Tee Tee stressed her opinion and, if crossed, might burst into tears. More than once I tried my hand at peacemaking, but it never worked, and often I just couldn't eat, and left the table.

My Mother taught me a lot of good things, about being polite and kind and thoughtful, about being true to the high principles you lived by. But the main thing I learned from her was to clear the air and not suffer in silence as she did. I caught her crying once by herself as she stood in the kitchen and watched Tee Tee walk over to Mother's side of the yard where her flowers were and, without a word to Mother, pick her prize poppy that she'd been coaxing along all week. I'll always believe the illness that finally killed my Mother came from all those years of holding in her feelings - even her feelings of amusement. She rarely laughed out loud, but claimed to "laugh inside." People thought she had no sense of humor. .I knew better.

But meanwhile Mother lived for Daddy and me and for Nannie and her sisters. They called her "Eenie," since her name was the two-syllable, long British version- Eve'-lyn. We named our first child after her, though pronounced with three syllables and a short e, Ev-e-lyn. It is sad to me that Mother never lived long enough to know our daughter or her brother or sister, or their father. She would have loved them all, and they would have brought her a lot of joy. As it was, Mother found pleasure in caring for her own family, Daddy and me and her Mother.

She always had her sisters' welfare in mind, but often overdid it. Sometimes she really did lecture them. Mother's standards were very high, in matters of morals and actions and appearances, and she felt she needed to steer them right. Me too. I was almost through high school before she'd even let me wear lipstick, and to this day I will dress for some occasion and then remove something - a scarf or an extra pin or necklace, so I won't look overdressed or "cheap," as Mother used to say.

All through Daddy's illness with his weak heart, she was at his side. She even gave me the treat of going to Mrs. Walsh's next door for supper every night, for a small fee probably, not only to free up time so she could nurse him, but to get me out of the house of illness and into a cheerier atmosphere. And when Daddy began to work again, I can see them now going all over Richmond, with him carrying the light things, and Mother toting his heavy sign kit so he wouldn't have to strain so much.

With his fragile health and her scorn of women who were always "running to the doctor with every little ache and pain," who would have thought she would go first? But those last years were sad ones, with me for a while bearing alone the information about her fatal diagnosis. In those days nobody talked openly about cancer, nor did a patient often know full details and prognoses. But near the end, I'm sure she knew as well as I did that she would never leave that hospital bed. The last day of her life, with the best smile she could muster, she instructed Daddy and me to get her pink spring suit out of the cleaners. When he had left the room, she looked and me and winked, "How'd I do?" She died a few weeks before her fiftieth birthday.

Something happened in the funeral home while Mother was "laid out" that she would have loved. People were saying how good she looked, as people will do no matter what. I came in, took one look and diverted my feelings by pouncing on the funeral director who had put an orchid into her pale, folded hands. I had heard my Mother declare, "I never had an orchid in my life. I certainly don't want one when I'm stretched out!"

As he was removing it from her stiff fingers, I looked up and saw walking into the big funeral parlor crammed with floral arrangements, one of our ancient relatives, a timid little old lady cousin in a drab coat and squashed tan felt hat on her mussed-up hair. Cousin Eulalia, she was. In her hands, clasped in front of her as if in prayer, was a small perfect bunch of Lily-of-the-Valley. I could see her already wondering where she would put them in that room so full of flowers. So I solved her problem, and she solved mine. Greeting her with a big welcome, I took her little bouquet and offered it as a substitute for the orchid. Cousin Eulalia was pleased.

And now, with lily-of-the-valley in my Mother's hands, even though she didn't really look the way my Mother should look, I could almost believe she had just picked them from her flower garden and brought them into the house.

CLARICE

The old snapshot is in black and white, and the scene remains so in my mind's eye, all except my cousin's red hair. That is just as colorful to me as if the camera had caught the exact shade of deep red, and the fair skin and tiny freckles under her blue eyes. Indeed it's as vivid to me now as if I really did remember that scene, but I couldn't have. I was only just learning to sit alone on a blanket in the back yard at our house when that picture was taken.

Clar'-ice (accent on the first syllable) played with me there, and from this photo mounted on a page in my baby book, she looks to be about fifteen years old. That was probably while she still lived in Richmond, before her father's business took the family to New York. Early on, I realized that she was a special pet of my great aunt.

That was "Tee Tee," as I named her trying to say "Auntie," and so she remained for the rest of her life. As I grew older and observed Tee Tee and Clarice together, I could see her look of great pride in her niece, and, although I often heard her correcting Clarice and telling her what she was doing wrong, whenever Tee Tee talked with other people, she told them how smart and attractive she was. When Clarice moved away, I was left to be, not only the apple of my aunt's eye, but also the obvious recipient of her attentions - good and bad. Tee Tee still wrote Clarice letters - surely letters of advice. Clarice dutifully wrote back from time to time. Whatever her news, Tee Tee had some judgment to pass on it, and probably passed it on to her in the next letter.

Clarice came of age with the flappers. I have no photo of it, but a vivid picture in my head of Clar-ice' (accent now on the second syllable) roaring into Richmond in her little brown roadster convertible with the rumble seat open. What a statement she made when she climbed out of that car, her rolled-top stockings showing her knees, red hair now in a boyish bob covered by a tan cloche. The long beads, painted nails, and the cigarette held just so in the long slim holder completed the portrait. She was a "knock-out" - or so my father said. Tee Tee looked on ambivalently, with pride at the figure she cut, but with a good measure of censure and disapproval. "Why did you cut off that pretty hair?" "That skirt is too short!" "You shouldn't be smoking!" Of course, she was right about that one.

I thought she was marvelous, and when my friends and I played "dress-up," I imagined that I could be just like her, candy cigarette and all.

As I look back now, I wonder how Clarice took all that criticism from Tee Tee. I didn't think much about it at the time, because I was too young. But in later years, I got plenty of it myself, and hated it. My hair was never long enough or short enough or curly enough to suit Tee Tee, nor was anything else just right - even up to how I raised my children. I knew she loved me and bragged about me to other people, but she all too often tried to control how I did things, just the way she tried to control Clarice. All that criticizing and meddling was as normal to Tee Tee as breathing, and spilled over into most of her relationships with those who really were dear to her. By the time many years later that Clarice declared her own independence of Tee Tee, I fully understood why.

Meantime, Clarice married rich. Ned was an inventor of sorts and had a number of patents. Obviously he was brilliant, and her advice to me as I was growing up was, "Be sure to marry a smart man; you'll never be bored." She was right, but in my early teens, I didn't see much to get excited about in Ned. He was bookish and professorial looking. I seem to see him in a vest and an old sweater - with patched elbows? And with a pipe in his mouth? I may be making that part up, just because it fits the personality I recall.

In the late '30s, I visited them in their three-story brownstone house in Brooklyn several times, frequently being treated by Clarice to first-run Broadway plays, The Man Who Came to Dinner and You Can't Take it With You; and she took me to a 1940 early showing of Fantasia. Being with Clarice was always exciting and entertaining, but kept me on edge because I was an awkward adolescent in the days before teen-agers, and I never knew for sure how to act. She told me Ned liked me because I was quiet, that he couldn't stand women who were too talk-a-tive. Of course I was quiet! I was scared of him and never knew what to say! But he took the time to teach me to solve crypto-grams, so I must have made some good impression on him.

As Ned's wife, Clarice had everything she could want. Her kitchen was equipped with all the best. She quoted Ned: "If you're going to do a good job, you've got to have good tools." I'm not sure how many meals she ever prepared, as they had a cook. She was free to pursue her interests, one of which for a while was ice skating. Being an excellent seamstress, she made her own skating outfits, every bit by hand, with the tiniest, most precise stitches you can imagine. Her sense of color was remarked upon, and whenever I put up a fuss about mixing the "wrong" colors together in my clothes, the family called me "Little Clarice." Of course, Tee Tee had things to say, again with some ambivalence, about her skills on the one hand and the fact that she could ice skate, which she was very proud of, and on the other hand "all that silliness" being such a waste of time. That comment surely found its way into a letter.

When Clarice grew tired of a skating costume she sent it on to me, and I remember two in particular that I wore in high school. One was a royal blue princess line dress with white cloth-buttons down the front, white piping around the Peter Pan collar and cuffs, and with a wonderfully flared skirt. (Of course I pretended to be ice skating when I wore it. It was during the time of Sonja Henie, after all.) Another was a skirt of a rust color, also very full at the hem, faced underneath with a luscious satin material in a blending shade. Wearing it, I always managed some way for the underside of that skirt to show.

For a high school graduation gift, Clarice sent me opera glasses, small and black, with neat Art Deco horizontal lines, in a brown leather case with my full name in gold. They have had regular use ever since, and are still in perfect condition fifty-five years later. "Good tools."

She wrote to me all through my years in college. Then in 1950, when Bill and I were married, we went to New York and had an evening meal with Clarice and Ned. There Bill and Ned discovered a mutual interest in science fiction, and before we left them, he generously piled innumerable paper backs on Bill, with the instruction, "When you finish each one, just throw it overboard." That's because next morning we were off to Europe on the New Amsterdam. Clarice was at the docks early to see us off, along with Tee Tee who had come up from Richmond, Clarice full of excitement at our imminent adventure, Tee Tee full of admonitions and anxieties at our being "so far from home."

Ned died in the next year or so, leaving Clarice a wealthy woman, and a "sitting duck," as she later admitted herself, ripe for being taken in by any charmer who came along, as one did very soon. Tee Tee could have told her - and you can be sure she did tell her - to beware of the likes of him! I cringed when I thought of all the censure Clarice was having to read in letters from Tee Tee because of her bad marriage, and fleetingly wondered if she had just gone ahead and married that man because Tee Tee had so harped on her not marrying him. Of course, Tee Tee was right again. The marriage didn't last long, and Clarice was alone once more, now wiser, and surely wearied at Tee Tee's continued naggings and "I told you sos." In all my observation of her, however, I never heard her retort in anger or even look pained, and certainly she never seemed crushed with hurt feelings. I really had no idea what went through her mind and heart whenever Tee Tee advised/corrected/chided her.

Not until the last time I saw Clarice, probably in 1955 or so, when Bill and I took our toddler, Lyn, and went to New York. There we met Tee Tee, who was thrilled to have us pay her way there so she could baby sit while we went to

galleries and plays. She was in paradise, and spent her baby-sitting time cooing over Lyn and showing her off in the lobby of the then-fine Taft Hotel before it fell on hard times. Clarice met the four of us for lunch one day in the coffee shop there, and when we finished, Bill went off to a museum, Tee Tee took Lyn back to see her admiring public in the lobby, and Clarice and I lingered over a cup of coffee. She told me her plan.

She was going to move to Florida and marry again. She had learned her lesson, and this marriage would not be a mistake. "But," she said, "now that Lyn's in the picture, I'm going to bow out. Nobody's going to hear from me any more - only my mother, and she's not going to give out my new address. I've stood this as long as I can." She admitted she knew I'd had more than my share of that smother-love of Tee Tee's, and was still struggling under it, "But now," she said, "Lyn can take some of that well-meant but misdirected attention. She'll get her fill of it soon enough."

We parted fondly, she went into the lobby and told Tee Tee and Lyn goodbye, and except for bits and pieces through her mother, that's the last I ever heard from Clarice.

TEE TEE

When Tee Tee had to leave the house she had built and lived in for almost forty years to move into the Hermitage Methodist Home there in Richmond, Virginia, I was confident that none of her family or remaining friends had expected me to take her in instead. They knew as well as I did what a disastrous move that would have been.

"Tee Tee" was Avis Hechler, my father's mother's baby sister. She was nearer to Daddy in age than to her sisters. They were my grandmother Minnie (that's "Ma") and Aunt Nellie. People called her Avis until my home-made name, Tee Tee, took over, and from then on she was Tee Tee, spelled out or by initials, for the rest of her life. My mother and father and I lived in the house with her.

She had learned to type in her youth and gone out into the business world. I don't know what preceded the Richmond Letter Shop, but she and Ada Gold owned and ran that business together from as far back as I can remember. They were equipped with every available type of office machinery of the day to produce letters and other printed matter in quantity for bulk mailings. (They were the Kinko's of their day!) With astute foresight Tee Tee had chosen never to learn how to use the mimeograph. She left that messy work to Miss Gold - who I remember sitting in a small rocker on her spare time cleaning her nails!

Tee Tee could run all the other equipment. Of course they both typed many individual letters for clients, clunking away on the latest upright Remington or Royal. But what I remember most vividly is watching Tee Tee set type for the multigraph. She had banks of type faces which could be picked off letter by letter onto long, skinny metal holders. From there they were transferred, line by line, onto a multigraph drum. When all the lines were in place, and the drum locked onto the machine, the inking and printing followed. This method produced multiple copies of a finer looking letter than the mimeograph could, almost like an original.

Whenever I visited her Shop, she'd let me play with the type, and often I'd help her stuff, seal and stamp envelopes. We used wet sponges for that. Sometimes she'd bring home a rush job, and my mother and father and I would join her, working as an assembly line around our dining room table. The Reynolds Metals Company of Richmond sent out its first promotional material for Reynolds Wrap in our region from her Shop, and Tee Tee brought home left-

over samples of the new product. So my mother used Reynolds aluminum foil in our kitchen before most people had ever heard of it.

It was because Tee Tee had a secure job during the Depression that she could afford to build a house in Barton Heights, and when it was completed, it became home not only for her, but for Mother and Daddy, and later me. I loved that house when I was little. It was stucco and had a big front porch to play on, and a big back yard with a special secret play place under the outside back stairs. I had a room of my own and, as an only child, three adults who adored me.

I spent a lot of time with Tee Tee. On weekends she baked cakes, her specialty. She'd make three or four at a time, white with chocolate icing one week, caramel icing another, devil's food cake another, and give away the extras. Each time, she made me a little five-inch layer cake of my very own, succeeding in nurturing the sweet tooth I still contend with. She made great butter cookies, pressed out of a long tube by a turning handle. The tube had a variety of tips, so that the cookies that came out took many shapes. But they all tasted the same. My mother did most of the general cooking, but once in a while Tee Tee would make Brunswick stew or fried chicken, her entire meal repertoire, and at least once a year she filled the house with such pungent, steamy fumes making her hot relish that our eyes watered, and I usually had to get out.

Tee Tee was known for her beautiful needlework. She made fine linen handkerchiefs, hemstitched, with colored threads pulled through to make a design, and with initials or tiny flowers embroidered, as appropriate. She sent a handmade gentleman's handkerchief to each U. S. President in turn, and received thank-you notes from them all. I have the letter signed by her hero, Woodrow Wilson.

I remember how on Saturday after-noons I'd climb up on Tee Tee's big bed and play with scissors and paper and crayons while she finished up some of her fine handwork and ironed the final product, all the while listening to the Saturday Metropolitan opera. I hated "all that screeching," and never dreamed I'd enjoy opera myself some day. On those afternoons she always gave me a manicure, filing and buffing my nails and applying a pale pink polish. I can almost smell that little cup of pink wax she finished them off with. I felt very grown up.

Snapshots show me as a baby wearing frilly bonnets she made me, and all the dresses Mother made for me were trimmed by Tee Tee's lacy collars and jabots. But as I grew older, I knew her preferences were much fancier than mine. I usually chose to shop for clothes with Mother instead of fighting Tee Tee's fussy choices at every turn. Later it was a surprise and a delight that, in spite of her

propensity for frills, in beautiful taste she made all the table linens for my hope chest - large cut-work tablecloths and napkins, embroidered bridge table sets, hemstitched and initialed pillow cases. Right from the beginning, Bill and I used them, and I'm so glad we did, even though they were a pain to wash and iron. But she got to see us enjoy them before wash-and-wear became available and much too tempting to pass up. I haven't used those fine things in years.

While I was growing up, Tee Tee was able to spend money on me my parents didn't have. With her I saw every new movie of Shirley Temple, Sonja Henie, Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astair, Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddie, and all the Andy Hardy movies - all first-run at the Lowe's Theater at Sixth and Broad down town, with its starry ceiling and clouds, and with Eddie Weaver at the organ. We went to the Mosque each spring to see the local children's big dancing school review, and there was always an all-day taffy sucker to keep me company.

Tee Tee was short like my father, plump and with dark complexion and dark hair. But very early pictures of her show a stunningly beautiful slim young woman with a regal bearing. She had always regretted that her complexion was dark in a day when being fair was the ideal, and told me she never drank coffee in her youth because people believed it darkened the skin. Her eyes were deep hazel, and her hair remained almost black all her life, with, like Ma, only a little gray in her last years.

I never heard an explanation of why she was an "old maid," as unmarried women were called. There was no talk of a jilting or jilted lover or any other romantic tragedy. Our daughter Carrie wonders if maybe she was lesbian in a time when most people wouldn't have recognized what that meant, or certainly wouldn't have talked about it. It's true I never heard of any romantic involvements, but she had many friends of both sexes, especially at Summer Rest, the big vacation spot in the Blue Ridge Mountains where we went every summer.

There Tee Tee was the life of the party. With not much to do in the way of enter-tain-ment in those days, the sixty or so guests made their own, playing parlor games, putting on shows and having "dress-up" nights. Tee Tee loved all this, and I have a picture of her in an outfit from the old wardrobe that we called the "Mae West" dress - black velvet with big white pom poms, a flared knee-length skirt and a matching toque set on her head at a rakish angle.

In addition, she had a "Little Old Woman" act that she developed. She'd stand behind a waist-high table, with stockings and shoes on her hands. Someone

else's arms came through from behind her to be the Little Old Woman's hands. She wore funny make-up with false teeth, and the two women were robed as one, swathed in a pongee kimono. The whole stage area was curtained in such a way that the second woman didn't show. Tee Tee "danced" with her little feet and made conversation with the admiring guest. It was very convincing - and hilarious!

It's hard to reconcile that picture with the lonely, bitter person Tee Tee became, her cheeks drawn down into permanent deep lines on either side of her mouth. Where that bitterness came from as the years passed, I really don't know. I do remember vague hints about some young woman she had apparently taken under her wing who later betrayed her in some way. But that had happened long before I was born, and no one ever told me the full story. I imagined this protégé of hers had disappointed her - who knows? - perhaps by having an illegitimate child. I never asked. But it's possible, because I soon caught on that one of the sins of others she was unable to forgive was ingratitude. She loved to do generous things for people, but wanted their never-ending loyalty and appreciation for it.

Perhaps it could be said of her what was said of Othello, that she "loved not wisely, but too well." She possessed all her friends and family, and tried to control them in ways they didn't want to be controlled. What she expected of them was not always what she got, and over and over she was disappointed by one generation after another - betrayed as she thought - as one by one, they'd had enough. My parents lived with it every day. I endured it all my adult life until she finally died. And even my children adored her when they were infants and toddlers, they all in turn gradually had their fill of her cloying smother-love, and were glad whenever they could avoid her.

There were a few summers when Bill was off in graduate school and she came for a visit with me and the children when we lived in Michigan. Whenever she came, things usually went beautifully for the first few days, and then, bit by bit, she'd get to me with her constant criticism and complaints. Oddly enough, the way she told it to other people, I was the ideal mother, Bill was wonderful, and our children were perfection. That's not the way we heard it, and it was great relief whenever her two or three weeks with us were over.

It became hard for her to look on the bright side of any situation. Always she feared the worst that could happen, or concentrated on the pain instead of the pleasure. Once a younger friend commented to her, "Tee Tee, aren't you lucky? So many people your age have all kinds of dietary restrictions, but you can eat anything, can't you?" She had no words for a reply, but looked stunned. Such a

blessing had never occurred to her, because she liked so few things! She'd refuse ever to try anything new to eat. When she was visiting us, with three little children and her to feed, my menus were really limited. If I'd venture to make something as exotic as barbequed chicken on the outdoor grill, I'd get a "What's this?" and a frown from her.

But her eating habits, like many of her habits, were tolerated by most of us, who had long ago given up trying to change her. "That's just the way I am," she would say, as if that excused anything.

She fought going into the Methodist Home, but finally had to, since that house was much too much for her to care for. She wouldn't have tolerated a stranger living there to help out, and certainly no one who knew her would consider living with her. Once she made the move, all she could think of was how perfect it had been back in her house. She just blanked out any recollections of the leaking roof or the big utility bills, or the dampness in the basement, or the painting and upkeep needs - forgetting also how many times she caught a burning pan on the stove just in time.

Little by little, because of her negative outlook, she alienated just about everyone whom she'd ever cared about. It was typical of her to complain because nobody came to see her, and then when they did come, to scold them for not having come sooner or not staying longer. A few of the steadfast faithful stuck by her to the end. But they all told me when she died that they knew I was relieved. I was grateful for that. They were relieved too. As they all said, "She was her own worst enemy."

What a shame, for such a gifted and lively and fun-loving person to have turned so bitter and resentful at the end. But here I am talking about her, the good memories and the bad alike. Because my children were most aware of my negative reactions to Tee Tee, this is my chance to be sure some of the good things are remembered too. After all, she's an important part of our family history.